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Accredit Public Libraries?
Stress in the Library
NEW ART BOOKS: A SEASONAL PREVIEW

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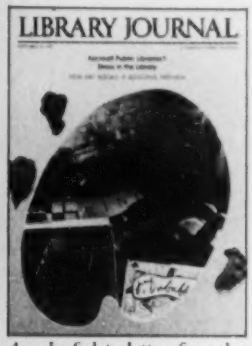

A colorful palette of works presented in "New Art Books: a Seasonal Preview," page 39. Photograph by Peter Neumann

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Library staff reveal sources of stress and satisfaction in their work

Stress in the Library

By Charles Bunge

"LIBRARIANS HAVE low-stress jobs." So might have read the headline for articles based on a 1986 wire service story about a research study done in England that found that librarians have a stress level of 2.0, compared with miners at 8.3 and construction workers at 7.5. Librarians who read such articles in the popular library press or in *Parade* magazine[1] might have wondered, "Why, then, do *I* feel so stressed? Am I just an oddball?" You might even have felt vaguely guilty for being such a wimp in what others seem to think is an easy job—a feeling that might actually add to your stress.

From reading the library literature and talking with hundreds of librarians, I am convinced that library work can be very stressful and that library staff members need not add feelings of isolation or guilt to their very real feelings of stress and lack of fulfillment in their jobs.

Some four years ago, *LJ* carried one of the early articles on stress and burnout among librarians.[2] In the intervening years this topic has been treated from a number of perspectives in library publications,[3] and the literature on the subject outside of librarianship has grown apace.[4] This literature, in addition to my own experience and reflection,[5] has formed the basis for a workshop on stress management for library staff members that I have presented some 20 times. During these workshop ses-

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Figure 1

Sources of Satisfaction—All Participants

Categories & Examples	% of Total
1. Patrons "Meeting interesting people" "Meeting with new people" "Working with the public"	8.7
2. Colleagues "Working with my colleagues" "Supportive colleagues" "The people I work with"	7.6
3. Variety "Variety of tasks" "Never the same question" "Diversity of people and tasks"	7.2
4. Flexibility and autonomy "Flexibility in duties" "Working on my own" "Flexibility in hours"	7.2
5. Problem solving "Challenge of the problem" "Detective work" "Helping solve a puzzle"	6.2
6. Learning "Learn every day" "Learning new things"	5.4
7. Accomplishment "Being proud of what I do" "Completing a job on time" "Feeling that I can help"	5.4
8. Finding answers "Finding the right info" "Help people find what they want"	5.1
9. Being around books "The wealth of info" "Working with knowledge" "I like books"	5.1
10. Being of service "Sharing myself with others" "Making a positive difference" "Giving service"	4.0
11. Students and children "Students keep me young" "Watching kids develop"	4.0
12. Positive feedback "Appreciation from patrons" "Hearing 'Thank you' " "Recognition from supervisor"	3.6
13. Using technology "Learning new technology" "High-tech atmosphere"	3.3
14. Quiet	2.9
15. Getting new books first	2.9
16. Getting paid	2.5
17. Using my own training and skills	2.2 1.8
18. Physical environment	1.8
19. Selecting materials	1.8
20. Providing access through cataloging	1.8
21. Supportive administration and supervisors	1.1
22. Opportunities to teach	1.1
23. Security of guidelines	1.1
24. Spending money	1.1
25. Misc. (less than 1% each)	6.5

sions, over 800 library staff members from all types of libraries have reported and discussed aspects of library work that they find stressful. These discussions illustrate and confirm some important points of consensus in the literature.

Stress management workshops

From the fall of 1983 to the summer of 1986, I conducted somewhat different versions of my workshop on stress management for library staff in 21 locations in Illinois, Minnesota, New York, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin. Some 850 staff members participated, in groups as small as 15 and as large as 70. In some of the workshops all the participants were reference librarians at various types of libraries. In others, there were participants with positions of different types in a variety of libraries. Several sessions were for staff in a single library, and several were for support staff members.

One of the purposes of the workshops was to have the participants gain insights from sharing feelings and experiences with each other. At one point in each session I divided the participants into two groups. Members of one groups were asked to name things about their jobs that give them satisfaction, joy, and fulfillment. Members of the other group were asked to name things about their jobs that are stressful or frustrating and that seem to block their fulfillment. If the total number of participants was large the reporting groups would also be segmented by type of library and type of position.

The reported items were recorded on large newsprint sheets and displayed for discussion by the participants. Each workshop session would normally produce about one-third as many positive statements as there were participants and about one-half as many negative statements as the number of participants.[6] Afterward, each distinctive statement from each workshop was recorded on a card so that the statements could be grouped in various ways for analysis.

Figure 2

Sources of Stress—All Participants

Categories & Examples	% of Total
1. Patrons	**15.0**
"Questions at closing time"	
"People who won't help themselves"	
"Problem patrons"	
"Discipline"	
"Babies at storyhour"	
2. Workload	**13.4**
"More work than I can get done"	
"Not enough staff"	
"Everything is a priority"	
"Lots of deadlines"	
3. Supervisors and management	**10.5**
"Not knowing where my supervisor is"	
"Inconsistent supervisor"	
"Being left out of decisions where I have expertise"	
"Responsibility without auth."	
"Poor communication from management"	
4. Schedule and workday	**7.2**
"Too many different kinds of tasks"	
"Unscheduled class visits"	
"Can't predict questions"	
"Rigid work schedule"	
"I can't set my priorities"	
5. Lack of positive feedback	**6.9**
"Lack of recognition for a job well done"	
"Getting no positive feedback"	
"The public's perception of my job"	
"Not being seen as a professional"	
"My low salary"	
6. Other staff members	**6.9**
"Sloppy work by others"	
"Lack of teamwork and coop"	
"Crabby co-workers"	
7. Lack of info and training	**6.7**
"Having to wing it all the time"	
"Not having enough info. to do my job well"	
"A supervisor who won't train me or answer questions"	
8. Feeling pulled and tugged	**4.1**
"Conflicting demands between work and personal life"	
"Differing expectations from different people"	
"Coping with situations beyond my control"	
"Always having to be nice"	
9. Technology and equipment	**4.1**
"Technological breakdowns"	
"Downtime"	
"Slow response time"	
10. Physical facilities	**4.1**
"Cramped, overcrowded office"	
"Having no privacy"	
"Noisy work area"	
11. Bureaucracy and red tape	**3.6**
"Bureaucracy instead of common sense"	
"Rules for the sake of rules"	
"Hierarchy, titles, & status"	
"Elitism"	
12. Unchallenging work	**3.3**
"Boring, routine tasks"	
"Lack of intellectual challenge"	
"My job is a dead end"	
"Doing statistics"	
13. Failure and uncertainty	**3.3**
"Not being sure patron's needs are met"	
"Making mistakes"	
14. Change	**2.6**
"Constant change"	
"Always changing policies and procedures"	
"Changing plans in the middle of a project"	
15. Lack of budget and resources	**1.9**
16. Misc. (less than 1% each)	**6.4**

Sources of satisfaction and stress

Examination of the statements made by the workshop participants show that they could be grouped into categories that were quite common from session to session. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of positive statements for all participants, and Figure 2 shows the negative statements. Under each category, example statements in the participants' own words are provided, and the percentage of the statements accounted for by each category is shown. (In attempting to interpret these figures, keep in mind that around two-thirds of all the participants are in public services positions.)

One aspect of the two lists in Figures 1 and 2 (i.e., the "raw" lists, without the categorizations done here) that always impresses workshop participants is how similar to each other they are. Other people, both patrons and colleagues, are a chief source of satisfaction, but they can also be important sources of stress. We take joy in the variety that our work offers, but the accompanying fragmentation and lack of predictability can be frustrating. Learning all the time from challenging responsibilities can be very fulfilling; but sometimes it seems that the more we know the more we should know, and at times the challenge seems overwhelming.

Some sessions of the workshop were attended only by reference librarians, and in others records were kept regarding whether statements were made by staff members with

Figure 3

Sources of Stress—Public Services Librarians

Categories & Examples	% of Total
1. Patrons	**41.4**
"Rude Patrons"	
"Patrons breathing down my neck."	
"Patrons expect miracles"	
"Disturbed patrons"	
"Parents doing kids' homework"	
"Mutilated materials"	
2. Workload	**12.5**
"The hectic pace"	
"Not enough time to be thorough"	
"Line of people & the phone rings"	
"Not enough staff"	
3. Feelings of inadequacy	**6.6**
"Not being able to serve a patron's needs"	
"Finding an answer too late"	
"Not knowing resources"	
4. Lack of positive feedback	**6.6**
"Family and friends don't understand my job"	
"Lack of understanding of library's role and value"	
"Not hearing 'Thank you' "	
5. Nonreference duties	**5.9**
"Supervisory duties interfere with reference work"	
"Photocopier maintenance"	
"Statistics and reports"	
6. Fragmentation	**4.6**
"Constant interruptions"	
"Fragmentation of my duties"	
"Too many off-desk tasks"	
7. Physical environment	**3.3**
"The reference bull pen"	
"Can't get away from patrons"	
"Overcrowded office"	
8. Scheduling	**3.3**
"Night and weekend work"	
"No unscheduled time"	
9. Equipment problems	**3.3**
10. Lack of resources	**2.6**
"Lack of answering sources"	
"Can't afford the tools we need"	
11. Having to be diplomatic	**2.0**
12. Repetitive or trivial questions	**1.3**
13. Poor communications	**1.3**
14. Misc. (less than 1% each)	**5.3**

public-contact or with non-public-contact positions (for convenience, called "public services" and "technical services" here). In all such sessions, the participants held positions at the professional level. This allows separating for examination statements known to have come from persons in each type of position.

Even after one takes out patrons as a source of stress for public services librarians, some interesting differences between the two lists show up. For example, the lack of positive feedback and evaluation is in different positions on the two lists. Within that category there are differences as well. Public services librarians are much more likely to report stress from a lack of understanding or appreciation on the campus or in the community, while technical services librarians are more likely to feel stressed by lack of appreciation *within* the library (especially from public services staff).

For example, catalogers feel that they never get compliments for good work, only complaints about unhelpful subject headings or slow processing. Technical services librarians also find stressful never seeing the results of their work, such as a fruitful search in the catalog or a book that they selected being used.

The workload is another important source of stress for both public services and technical services librarians. Both groups report being frustrated by what seems like an ever-increasing number of special projects, without any decrease in the volume of "regular" work. However, here too, the statements and discussion of them at workshops reveal some differences. Reference librarians most frequently report being stressed by the sheer volume and hectic pace of reference questions. Technical services librarians seem more frustrated by the feeling of never being finished or of having just as much work to do at the end of the day as there is at the beginning, and they seem to envy the sense of closure that reference librarians can get from leaving the reference desk at the end of a shift.

Technical services librarians more frequently report being stressed by unchallenging duties, while some reference librarians report that the necessity of working nights and weekends causes stress. The feelings of inadequacy and frustration at being unable to find answers to reference questions (or at finding answers after the patrons have left the library) are stressful to reference librarians in a way that seems not to have a counterpart among reports from technical services librarians.

Support staff stress

The positions held by support staff members range from junior clerical positions to high-level paraprofessional jobs, mainly in public and academic libraries in technical services positions. There are some striking differences between the statements from support staff members and those from the other groups. The categories and percentages in Figure 5 are more similar to reports that would come from support staff in institutions other than libraries than they are to reports from professional staff members in libraries.

In general, as workshop participants discussed their statements, the greatest overall source of stress for support staff members seems to come from their perception of being held accountable for a high volume of high-quality work without the support of good supervision, sufficient training, adequate communication from the organization, or effective feedback and evaluation. Feeling pulled and tugged or enmeshed in a bureaucracy without control, power, or autonomy, is a source of stress commonly reported in the literature, and it is one that shows up prominently in the statements from support staff here (note categories 6, 8, 10, and 13 in Figure 5).

Different type, same stress

Another potential source of variation among reported sources of stress is type of library. It is possible to separate statements known to be from staff members in public, academic, and special libraries (especially in health science and scientific research environments). Examination of statements separated and grouped by type of library fails to reveal important differences in categories or proportions. Special librarians did offer somewhat more statements concerning stress from "high status" patrons who fail to recognize or respect their expertise and skill. Academic librarians report that they are frustrated at being treated like second-class citizens on their campuses, while public librarians report stress from not being respected at City Hall or by

being thought to get paid for reading books. The specific nature of "problem" patrons varied from type to type of library, but the proportion of reports of stress from this source are only slightly higher in public libraries than in other types.

Your own brand of stress

What insights can be drawn from these statements and the various breakdowns presented here? Three characteristics of these lists nicely illustrate and confirm important concepts from the literature of stress and stress management: 1) the wide variety of sources of stress reported; 2) the similarity between the list of sources of joy and the list of sources of stress; and 3) the variation in the lists by type and level of library position. Perhaps the most important insight to be drawn from these three characteristics is that stress and its sources are very unique to each of us and to the situation in which we find ourselves. One of the faults of treatments of stress by the popular media is their tendency to treat stress as some global force out there waiting to burn us out.

The fact that the sources of joy and fulfillment and those of frustration and stress are so similar points out that different people (and the same person under different circumstances) can find a particular phenomenon challenging (pleasantly stressful) or frustrating (painfully stressful). The fact that the same items show up on both lists also demonstrates that many or most aspects of library jobs are not inherently stressful (at least not painfully so). Rather, whether or not they produce stress depends on the situation or other factors.

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Underlying these observations is a particular definition or concept of stress as a phenomenon or process in our lives. The definition of stress on which there is the most consensus in the literature is that stress is a person's physiological and psychological reaction to a challenge or demand that is placed upon him or her. The demand or challenge (or its source) is commonly called a "stressor."

For most people most of the time, our reactions to challenges and demands are part of the joy and verve of our lives. If they are painful, they are only temporarily or mildly so. To the extent that our reactions to challenges and demands are continually or severely painful, we can say that we have "distress," "strain," or stress as it is commonly understood.

Sometimes, for some people, the strategies that they use to cope with or lessen painful stress seem to contribute to the problem in a vicious-circle way, rather than to be true solutions. To the extent that this is generally true for a person and the vicious circles are out of control, the person might to be said to be burning out or to be burned out.

What we all need to keep our reactions to demands from being painful are resources—physical health and stamina, positive attitudes toward ourselves, support and encouragement from those around us, and effective strategies and skills for restoring physiological and psychological balance when confronted with things that are particular stressors for us. Just as each person is unique with regard to the particular things that are stressors for him or her, so each person is unique with regard to the type and mix of resources he or she needs to cope happily and with joy.

One of the most important general stress-management strategies is the continual development of one's awareness regarding these two aspects of one's self, because controlling and avoiding painful stress is largely a matter of maintaining a balance between the challenges and demands we are under and the resources we have to cope and thrive.

Lessons to be learned

Using this way of looking at stress and stress management can allow one to draw confirming examples and insights from the five figures. For example, both public services and technical services librarians need to find ways to deal with workload as a stressor. However, the particular strategy for coping with the hectic situation of a line of patrons at the desk and the ringing telephone should be different from that of coping with the frustration of never seeing the pile of work to be done diminish (because someone is always replacing completed work with new work).

In the latter situation, a potentially helpful technique would be to

Figure 4

Sources of Stress—Technical Services Librarians

Categories & Examples	% of Total
1. Workload "Never being done" "Never being caught up" "More special projects, but must get regular work out"	21.7
2. Lack of positive feedback "Not being appreciated by the rest of the library" "I never see the end results of my work" "I get only complaints"	17.4
3. Fragmentation "My work is all problems, no pattern" "Too many kinds of tasks" "Trying to balance duties"	17.4
4. Physical environment "Clutter" "No windows"	8.7
5. Unchallenging work "Doing the same thing over and over" "Unchallenging, boring work"	8.7
6. Technology and change "Computer downtime" "Systems change too fast"	8.7
7. Lack of budget and resources	8.7
8. Having no input to decisions	4.3
9. Misc. (less than 1% each)	4.4

Figure 5

Sources of Stress—Support Staff Members

Categories & Examples	% of Total
1. Supervisors and mgt. "Supervisors who won't stand up for our department" "No resolutions or closure on problems" "Boss with double standard" "Supervisor always at meetings"	18.4
2. Other staff members "People not carrying their weight" "Doing other people's work" "Incompetent co-workers" "Backstabbing" "Too much competition"	13.2
3. Workload "Too much work expected" "Quantity over quality" "Short (unnecessarily so) deadlines"	9.2
4. Lack of positive feedback "Evaluation is not timely" "Evaluation is not effective" "Lack of respect and recog."	7.9
5. Physical facilities "Indequate space" "No windows" "Fluorescent lights"	6.6
6. Feeling pulled and tugged "Being in the middle between patrons and library rules" "Responsibility without auth." "Feeling vulnerable and powerless"	6.6
7. Inadequate training, knowledge "Not having enough training to do my job" "Incomplete training" "Having to ask too many questions"	5.3
8. Bureaucracy and procedures "Time-consuming procedures that seem unnecessary" "The pecking order" "Too many chiefs, too few Indians"	5.3
9. Poor communication "Nothing in writing" "Mgt. doesn't tell us anything"	3.9
10. Having no input into decisions	3.9
11. Equipment and technology "Downtime on OCLC" "Not being able to get at terminal or printer"	3.9
12. Frustrations on the job "I fear making mistakes" "When work goes slowly"	3.9
13. Fragmentation and schedule "No flextime" "Can't structure my time" "Working in two sections"	3.9
14. Boredom and tedium "Unchallenging, dead end job"	2.6
15. Change and uncertainty	2.6
16. Misc. (less than 1% each)	2.6

keep one's eye on the "work completed" pile or shelf and to set targets and keep track of how much work is really completed in a day or week, so that the challenge of the ever-full "in basket" can be balanced with a feeling of accomplishment and pride in the work turned out. In the reference desk situation, perhaps developing skills at concentrating on the patron at hand, using self-calming techniques, and using technology to reduce the disruptiveness of the telephone would be effective strategies. (For both, developing skills at assertively asking for more realistic workloads might be important, as well!)

Certainly, persons with supervisory and management responsibilities can take some lessons from Figure 5. Even if a supervisor believes that perceptions such as those expressed about supervisors do not reflect reality, the perceptions and the stress reactions to them are realities and may well be reducing the productivity (surely the happiness) of the staff members holding them.

The supervisor's absence from the department was a frequently mentioned stressor. Being aware of this for one's own staff (and sensitively trying to sort out whether the stress is due to frustration at the supervisor's lack of availability for consultation and direction, the fact that the supervisor's absence leaves the department shorthanded, or envy of the variety of the supervisor's day), the supervisor can work with affected staff members to keep the stress related to such absences at a reasonable level.

Effectively and happily managing stress in our lives starts with awareness and understanding of ourselves as unique, complex human beings: awareness of what uniquely makes me happy, gives me joy, and can serve as resources for meeting challenges and demands; continual awareness and monitoring of what is stressing me, in what situations, and how I am reacting; and sensitivity to messages of pain and hurting that my mind and body are trying to give me regarding imbalances between the challenges I am under and the resources I have available to cope.

With such self-knowledge, we are in a good position to identify the unique mix of resources and skills that each of us should continually be developing, in order to avoid or manage the specific stressors that are problems for us, be they skills at reaching out to others for support, skills at asking for our rights assertively, relaxation skills, better nutrition habits, or a clearer sense of our values and priorities.

Surely, with the current and projected economic situation and the increasing complexity of the library and information world, sources of stress are not going to decrease for library staff. And surely, some of us at some times will not cope with our stress effectively. Turning the situation around and restoring the balance will not always (or even usually) be easy, but the happiness and joy that can come from library work are certainly worth the effort.

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1. *Parade*, August 17, 1986, p. 9.
2. Blood, Rudolph, "Librarian Burn-Out," *LJ*, Nov. 1, 1982, p. 2048-51.
3. For a useful listing of such treatments see: Hack, Mary, John W. Jones, and Tina Roose, "Occupational Burnout Among Librarians," *Drexel Library Quarterly*, Spring 1984, p. 46-72.
4. This literature is vast. Among the books that have usefully synthesized the findings of research and clinical practice for a lay audience are: Cherniss, Cary. *Staff Burnout: Job Stress in the Human Services*, Sage, 1980; Freudenberger, Herbert J. and Geraldine Richelson. *Burn-Out: the High Cost of High Achievement*. Anchor: Doubleday, 1980; Maslach, Christina. *Burnout: the Cost of Caring*. Prentice-Hall, 1982; and Shaffer, Martin. *Life After Stress*. Plenum, 1982.
5. Some of these experiences and reflections are reported in: Bunge, Charles A., "Potential and Reality at the Reference Desk: Reflections on a 'Return to the Field,' " *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, July 1984, p. 128-132.
6. No particular conclusions should be drawn from this disparity in numbers. Participants tend to be more general in statements about sources of satisfaction and more detailed about sources of stress. Also, the nature of the workshop topics and the time allocations encouraged fuller reporting of sources of stress.